

Debate on family friendly policies

Sunday, 16 September 2007

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I am honoured to follow such a commendable speech by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh). I welcome the honesty of the speeches that have been made from both sides of the House. The hon. Gentleman said that we must view the matter in terms of what is happening in the real world. Regardless of whether we like change, it has happened.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Lorna Fitzsimons) and I were both 29 when we were elected to the House, and we can tell hon. Members, in case they had not noticed, that life for our generation has changed beyond recognition. The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) is not so much beyond our age group--

Mr. Brady: I was also 29 when I was elected, but I have not aged as well as the hon. Lady.

Ms King: I apologise for having mistaken you for middle-aged. You evidently have the aura of an elder statesman.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Lady must remember to use the correct parliamentary language.

Ms King: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

This debate is about time and money. It is about people having enough time to bring up their children and care for their relatives, and enough money to prevent their development or care being stunted by poverty.

I congratulate the Government on the steps that have been taken so far. The difference in the attitude between this Government and the previous Administration--although not necessarily current Front-Bench spokespersons--is the difference between night and day. However, as other speakers have pointed out, we must continue to move on and move further.

The Nordic model has been mentioned. In five or 10 years, and I hope sooner, that will be the norm in Britain. Eventually, in any civilised society, a woman will

have the right and the ability to put her child into care or some kind of provision from the time the child is one year old.

Mr. Leigh: Will the hon. Lady make it clear that a woman should have a choice between putting her child in a full-time nursery or looking after the child at home and being paid by the state for so doing? That is an important point.

Ms King: It is an extremely important point, and I wholeheartedly commend the concept of choice. I shall return to the subject of choice and flexibility.

Although my hon. Friend the Minister for Competitiveness is no longer in his place, I congratulate him on his appointment and look forward to the contribution that he will make, given his experience in the trade union movement.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for her campaigning efforts to raise awareness of the problems faced by many parents in maintaining the balance between work and parenting commitments. I am particularly indebted to her for the research that she commissioned from the Centre for Longitudinal Studies and the policy proposals that have arisen from it.

In their employment policies, the Government have recognised that families are changing. In the vocabulary of the modern business lexicon, we would say that families are more flexible. Too often, as we have heard, marriage or any type of stable partnership is no longer for life. Following on from the comments of the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West, I want to put it on record that I, like most of our generation, believe in a stable partnership and do not care whether that is in the institutionalised framework of marriage.

Our generation should not be penalised for not choosing the establishment route of marriage. The most important aim is to ensure that the children are not penalised. That can be achieved only by encouraging couples--not necessarily married couples--to stay together in stable relationships.

The good news is that children can be, and often are, nurtured in all types of families. It is the role of the state not to dictate the shape of those families, but to stop employers discriminating against families and parents. All too often, that has been translated into straightforward discrimination against women. However, men now recognise that they are losing out as much as women have done. They are being deprived of their rights as fathers.

I would like employers to recognise the benefits of embracing social change rather than retreating from it. That will be difficult because of the current "hire 'em and fire 'em" mentality that pervades many businesses, but, with the political

leadership that the Government have shown, it should not be impossible. Half the battle has been won. Employers recognise that the most important investment is investment in human capital. Family friendly policies are part of that investment. Only the most churlish employer--or, perhaps, Opposition spokesperson--could fail to welcome the measures that the Government have already introduced to make the workplace more family friendly. From the look of

consternation on the faces of Opposition Front Benchers, perhaps they welcome those measures. Among them are the introduction of a 13-week period of parental leave, which is a vital step in enabling parents to take time off in the first five years of their child's life without worrying about losing their jobs.

Mrs. Browning: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, particularly as she drew attention to the expression on my face. If the Government believe that parental leave is the right policy, why have they not made it paid leave? As we have discussed, unpaid leave makes it a policy for the few, not the many. I hope that she will use her influence, because it is obviously much greater than mine, to persuade Ministers to do what they think is right and to be prepared to pay for that themselves, rather than expect other people to pick up the tab on their behalf.

Ms King: Is the hon. Lady supporting paid parental leave?

Mrs. Browning: We made our views on that very clear when the legislation went through Parliament, but the Government have created an unfair policy. She will know that, because she will be receiving the same post as I am from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and others. It is not for the Opposition to clear up the mess of an ill-thought-through Government policy; it is up to them, as the legislators and the Executive in the House, to put fair and just policies on the statute book. That is their responsibility, but they have clearly failed to satisfy the hon. Lady and her friends that their policy is fair or just.

Ms King: The policy that the Government have put on the statute book represents the first step taken by this country, or by any Government, to make family friendly policies pay at work and I welcome that, although I hope that they go further. I echo the comments of other Members who made that point, but it is impossible to deny the astonishing achievements that have been made so far.

Mr. Pond: Taking account of the comments made by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), is my hon. Friend aware that the Confederation of British Industry has described the introduction of parental leave as a seismic shift in favour of family friendly employment policies? Is there not some difference between what it believes to be important and what the hon. Lady appears to believe?

Ms King: I was not aware of that, but it has been drawn to my attention that the CBI is eminently sensible and reasonable in its approach to many policies. I hope that Opposition Front Benchers might adopt such an approach at some point.

Let me return to the steps that the Government have taken. People can have time off for family emergencies, the working time directive has been implemented, the statutory right to four weeks' annual paid leave has been extended and the national child care strategy, which was introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham, provides 1 million places. All those measures not only shore up the position of parents,

but encourage those parents outside the labour market to seek work safe in the knowledge that their children will not suffer as a result.

The working families tax credit and the forthcoming child care tax credit will play a vital role in encouraging parents back to the workplace. Those are all ways of ensuring that the workplace is not hostile to people with young families. However, we must go past the point of neutralising hostility and actually achieve a welcoming environment. That will require a renewed commitment from the Government and a sea change in attitudes among many employers.

The research that I mentioned earlier, commissioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham, revealed two interesting points. Clearly, every child is different and has different needs, but the research showed that the prospects for a child's development may be improved if the mother has the choice of staying at home during the first year. I wish that I had that choice. Of course, if I were to have a child, I would not be able to stay at home for my child's first year. If we worry about future generations, we should give British mothers that choice.

The research also showed that a child's development may be improved further, or at least not harmed, if the mother then goes out to work when her child is a year old. I urge the Government to consider the conclusions of the research so that it informs future Government policy.

I have no hesitation in echoing the appeal made by my right hon. Friend first, to extend the right to return to work from six

to 12 months and, secondly, to extend maternity pay so that low-paid mothers benefit. It simply is not fair if only middle-class parents benefit from changes.

Looking to the future, I hope that mothers will be given the right to work part time after maternity leave. That suggestion was made by the Select Committee on Education and Employment and was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey). Mothers should be able to return to work part time, unless their employer can show that that would cause the business considerable harm.

I also support paid parental leave. I believe that, in five or 10 years' time, it will be the norm in any civilised society. The case for paid parental leave was made by my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly), for Rochdale and for Wentworth, and the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), among others. I congratulate the Social Security Committee on its report on that subject and urge the Government to consider their response to it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, West pointed out that paid parental leave at a flat rate of £100 a week would cost the Treasury an estimated £285 million a year. I concur with the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, who said that he cannot imagine how that money could be better spent. We cannot afford not to spend the money in that way. Above all, it is what parents want. As the Government survey of 30,000 women showed, women do not want the Government to make choices for them; they want the Government to support them in the choices that they make.

Mothers face enormous difficulties in trying to reconcile the work-life dichotomy. For example, one of the technical difficulties that they face is the administrative nightmare of statutory maternity pay and maternity allowance.

A young mother, who recently visited my constituency surgery, is still waiting for her claim for statutory maternity pay to be paid more than two years after making it. That is not only because her former employer is being obstructive, but because of the lack of competence at the local Benefits Agency office. Opposition from employers and an inadequate administrative response from Benefits Agency offices combine to put new mothers in an intolerable position.

I welcome with open arms the idea of replacing statutory maternity pay, maternity allowance and child care tax credits for babies in the first 12 months by something along the lines of a baby tax credit. That is a sensible idea, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's views on that.

We must break down not only the physical barriers to making work and parenting more compatible, but the mental attitudes in the workplace. Young women with babies often do not get the promotions that they deserve. I am delighted that the Government have shown that that is not case here by promoting my hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). That was an exceptionally well-deserved promotion. She has a five-month-old baby, and is the youngest Minister in this Government. I hope that we shall put our own house in order, so that women in the home, in the House and in society at large have the rights and opportunities that they deserve.

For that to happen, a key change is required. Time for children must become an important workplace issue. I had a conversation with--

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Lady that she should address the Chair.

Ms King: I appreciate your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have never received guidance from anyone other than the Chair on what one should do, so I am grateful to you for that.

I recall a conversation with my right hon. Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham. She told me that, 10 years ago, it was not acceptable for her to tell the Whips that she had a problem and had to see her child who needed her. I am sure that our Whips are no longer like that.

Mr. Mike Hall (Weaver Vale): Not at all.

Ms King: I am delighted to have that on the record. The Whip affirms that that is no longer a problem for women MPs. However, it is a problem in most workplaces. Most forward-thinking employers tell us--studies in this area confirm this--that employees who enjoy a good balance between work and family life are more productive, motivated and committed, and therefore more valuable than those who do not.

I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman), who said that the work-life balance remains a pipe dream. I worked in the European Parliament with a young French women. She returned to France and I returned to Britain. She became a French civil servant and I became a British Member of Parliament. We regularly worked 80-hour weeks, and we used to say how amazing it would be if we lived in a world in which we were expected to work only 35 hours a week. She now lives in a country whose Government have introduced a 35-hour week. I am certain that there will be many obstacles to that working effectively, but I have not yet noticed the French economy or the French Government

falling apart as a result of introducing a 35-hour week. That woman is now a senior civil servant with 20 civil servants working under her, and she works a 35-hour week, but, as I have said, for those of us here, that remains a pipe dream. I hope we soon recognise that we must make more efforts in this regard if we are to have socially functioning families.

At the beginning of the century, Labour campaigned, along with the trade unions, for the day to be divided into eight hours for work, eight hours for rest and eight hours for family and recreation. Today, a hundred years on, the eight-hour day is still as far away as an alien from outer space--for most Members of Parliament, certainly. I hope that we shall eventually evolve into a more civilised society.

Let me return to the central point about time and money. This may seem a sweeping generalisation, but while, high-income parents have the money and low-income parents have the time, neither group enjoys the quality of life that we expect today. Indeed, many working women--many stressed-out working parents--consider that their position is worse than it would have been 50 years ago. Let us give parents choice, and work towards the creation of that more civilised society.